A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Chapter 46

To no one's surprise, Buna was the first one out of the medbay on *Encounter*. Barabels were tough and healed fast, the big reptilian wasted no time in teasing the other wounded that she was back in business before the ship even left Emberlene. Durm, Zule, and Sanya were slower in recovery.

"I hate this," Zule said, her leg encased in bacta.

"This is why I joined the Trade Federation," said Durm, who had patches all over his side where the shrapnel had got him. "If I wanted to spend days in the medbay, I would have joined the gunnery battalions..."

"I just hope my plants are okay," Sanya said. "And I hope *he* doesn't come to life."

He in question was a clone trooper, hooked up to all manner of machines. Ever since his arrival, he'd just laid in the bed he was strapped to, staring at the ceiling, as silent as the grave. "Creepy," Zule muttered.

"Why is he even aboard?" asked Durm.

"Because something nasty happened to him," Zule said. "Because Esera Komara has a heart made of mush and couldn't leave him to die."

"She couldn't leave you to die either, from what I heard," Sanya told her.

"Shut up, civvie."

"Take it easy, ensign," said Durm. "Commander Voyan is probably pulling all-nighters to put back together what we messed up. Be glad you get to lay back."

Zule crossed her arms and pouted. "Maybe I want to be at work," she muttered.

I know I do, thought Sanya. She felt the rumble of the engines through the deck and bed frame. *Encounter* was departing Emberlene at last, after a few hours of hellish fear and a week of utter boredom.

Securing help for the catatonic ARC trooper had taken every resource Esera had. But before *Encounter* reached the main lanes after days of backcountry hyperspace routes barely worthy of the name, she'd found it. The ship broke out onto the Gamor Run and in a few hours they were on the Corellian Run, which would take them to the edge of the Outer Rim in but half a day. Everything from Allanteen to Mon Gazza had once been Confederate space, but this pocket had been occupied by the Republic since the third year of the war started. The Second Fleet, based at Druckenwell, had been hammered over and over until it'd finally been pushed out to Ryloth and then finally to Tellanroaeg, where it met its demise. Its shattered remnants had fled to Sluis Van in the days after Grievous's victory at Coruscant.

Now, it seemed, the Republic too had retreated from this part of the Corellian Run. When *Encounter* entered the Churba system, there was no sign of any garrison force, only local traffic. She kept the ship far out from the planet of New Cov, which while Separatist in sympathy, had been under Republic occupation for over a year. Soon, the ship she was waiting for revealed itself.

The J-type Nubian skiff was hard to miss once it was on visual scanners. The chromium-plated vessel had long graceful wings for atmospheric flight, two underslung engines, and a tear-drop hull. *What a beautiful ship,* thought Esera.

"We're being hailed, Captain," a bridge crew droid announced. "Voice only."

"Put them through."

"*Separatist destroyer* Encounter," said a firm male voice, "*this is Star Skiff* Autumn Breeze, *acknowledge.*"

Esera keyed up the microphone. "This is *Encounter*. You are cleared for landing. Be advised hangar space is limited, we'll be moving some of our light craft out to give you room."

"*We are advised.*"

Down in the hangar, their Maxillipede shuttle as well as the Republic attack shuttle left by the clone commandos both flew out, and took up position beside the mothership. *Whirlwind* had been shunted off to the side, along with Voyan's landspeeder. Esera watched the star skiff come in, rotate inside the hangar, and touch down, with centimeters to spare from bumping the walls and *Whirlwind*.

Not bad, thought Esera. Wisely, the nose of the skiff pointed out of the hangar, they were ready to get out of there in an instant. The ramp dropped, and down came an imposing man with an eyepatch. He had a blaster pistol drawn, but not raised, and swept his gaze across the hangar. There were only three other living things besides him: Esera, Zule Xiss, and the clone.

"Why do you need me again?" asked Zule. "I literally got out of medbay a few hours ago, I don't know how much I'll be worth in a fight."

"In case it's a trap," said Esera. "Murshida would scare them if it's not, but he's in the hall behind us. It looks like it's not... let's go."

She and Zule pushed the floating gurney down the catwalk stairs, and onto the deck. The one-eyed man gave them a careful look. Both Esera and Zule were in their midnight blue uniforms, they looked very military today. Naturally this man was on guard. But he spoke:

"We're clear."

Out of the star skiff came a short, brown-haired woman in white.

"Senator Amidala," said Esera. "Thank you for coming."

"Esera Komara," Admidala said, her voice cooler than their last meeting. "I've heard quite a bit about you since Naboo."

"Most of it false, I hope you realize."

"I talked to Obi-wan Kenobi before I came here. He doesn't approve, but he does think you're serious. And I see he was right." She nodded to the clone, staring up at nothing with empty eyes. "Why bring me all the way out here for one clone trooper?"

"He needs help. Jedi help. You're my only contact with the Jedi on this side of the Galaxy."

"All this for one clone?" Amidala raised an eyebrow.

"It was that or leave him to die. I had a chance to help someone, I took it."

For a moment, the two locked eyes. And then, Amidala gave the slightest hint of a smile. "I think that Aspar fellow was very wrong about you, Esera. What happened to this clone?"

"He's an ARC trooper, Alpha-82. A certain Janus Greejatus dispatched both his team and a team of commandos to kill me, destroy my ship, and take a Sith artifact off of Emberlene last week."

At the mention of Greejatus, Amidala's lip curled. "I never liked that man," she said. "I have no regrets about taking his job." *Greejatus was her sector's senator once,* Esera recalled.

"Emberlene has its own Force-using tradition. Very Sith influenced. One of their *wise women* entered this clone's mind and tore the information she wanted out of him. He's been like this ever since. It was pure dark side. I've never seen someone's eyes turn yellow and red like that before."

"I have," said Amidala. "Darth Maul. I saw him on Naboo during the invasion, he had eyes like that... If anyone can help this man, it's the Jedi."

"That's what I thought," said Esera.

Amidala turned to Zule, and looked her over. "Anakin- I mean, General Skywalker, once mentioned a Zeltron girl with a mechanical arm to me. You're not..?"

"Yeah," said Zule, crossing her arms. "I'm Zule Xiss."

"He had nightmares about that place. About leaving the rest of you behind. I don't think he ever got over abandoning all those people..." Amidala shook her head. "He always said following the evacuation order was one of his greatest mistakes, he always wondered what would have happened if he'd been strong enough to- well, never mind. Nothing will change the past."

"No, it won't," agreed Zule. But she looked away, troubled.

"Captain Typho, please get this man aboard," Amidala said. The one-eyed man nodded, and brought the clone aboard. "Thank you, Esera, for doing the right thing. One life might not seem like much, but it matters."

"One last thing, Senator." Esera stepped forward, and lowered her voice. "This clone said something I can't get my mind off of. When he tried to kill me, he told me they'd been ready to take down Jedi 'since day one.' Maybe it was bravado, but I didn't sense deception in him."

The Senator frowned. "I'll let General Kenobi know," she said. "That's very disturbing, if true. Thank you again, Esera."

Soon, the skiff departed, heading out for who knew where. Letting such a dangerous clone go might have been a mistake, but only a potential mistake. For all she knew, he'd never recover from what Aredian had done to his mind. Letting him die on the streets of Emberlene while she could have done something would have been a very real mistake. And saving even one life, even an enemy's, was still better than constant soul-numbing bloodshed she found herself involved in.

Zule was feeling reflective, too, it looked like. "Are you alright?" asked Esera.

"Yeah, of course," Zule said, not looking her in the eyes. "I mean, yeah, of course, Captain."

Esera wasn't buying it. "Go see if Voyan needs help, ensign."

"Right away, Captain." Zule rushed off at an awkward hobble, her leg not quite healed.

Figures, thought Esera. *Zule gets shaken up, first thing she does is rush off to talk to Voyan about it. How did that man of all people end up as ship's counselor...*

The day had turned appropriately dark and foreboding, as Tarkin's executive airspeeder pulled up at the Center for Military Operations. With him was Janus Greejatus and Ardabur Aspar, plus a number of the Red Guard in the vehicle behind them. A cold breeze tugged at Tarkin's robes of office, and Greejatus drew his cloak about him closer.

A squad of clone shocktroopers escorted them into the building. Huge scarlet banners hung from the building, bearing the black and white roundel of the Republic. Tarkin hadn't been here since the incident with Ahsoka Tano. How long ago had that been now? A year and a half? *Longer than that*, he thought.

They were taken deep into the facility, where the highest-security prisoners were housed. "Have any of you met Maul before?" asked Tarkin.

"Yes, my lord," said Greejatus. "I had a few dealings with him when he was Sidious's apprentice. I do not think he'll take kindly to me."

"But you're our expert on Sidious's more esoteric doings, Greejatus, you're coming with."

Greejatus gulped, but stayed silent.

Getting into Maul's cell was an ordeal. There were seven different doors, each made of a different material and with a different lock mechanism. Tarkin and his party were made to stand and wait at each one as the locks cycled and the doors slowly slid open. In the final room, a chamber not much larger than a closet, was the Mandalorian vault that kept Maul. The box was ornately decorated, with reliefs of Mandalorians battling the ancient Jedi. Only a small slit in the front allowed one to look inside, at the captive within. Through some arcane technology or spell, now lost to the Galaxy, the box cut off access to the Force inside it.

"So, this is Maul," Tarkin said. "Aspar, open it."

"Yes, my lord," said Aspar.

The door of the vault swung open with a hiss, revealing the dark interior laced with flame-red circuitry. Maul was held standing inside, limbs locked, some kind of device covering the lower half of his face. He was awake, and aware, his sulfuric eyes tracked every movement.

"Release him," said Tarkin.

Aspar hesitated a moment, and then pushed the button. The restraints unlocked and opened, and Maul tumbled out onto the cell floor, at the feet of Tarkin. He coughed and wheezed, and shakily pushed himself onto his knees.

"Who are you?" Maul asked, voice hoarse, face quizzical.

"I am the Supreme Chancellor, Wilhuff Tarkin."

"Palpatine is... dead?"

"Yes, Palpatine is dead."

"Sidious is dead..." Maul uttered the words as if he didn't believe them, and looked down at the floor. "I *felt* it, but I never dared to imagine..."

Tarkin gave Greejatus a look. Palpatine and Sidious were instantly equated by Maul, and that was something he could not ignore. *We'll talk later,* he thought. "Are you aware that Dooku is dead as well?"

"Yes, yes, I had a feeling he was gone too..." Maul noticed that there were more men in the room besides himself and Tarkin. He turned his head slowly, sizing up the masked Aspar, and then to Greejatus, who twitched. "I see you've got the sniveling dark acolyte at your side. He was quick to ingratiate himself. But who is this masked man?"

"Ardabur Aspar, a Knight of the Republic," Aspar said. "Formerly a Jedi."

"Now that is something I did *not* foresee." Maul shifted, going from kneeling to sitting cross-legged, leaning against the vault. "I have been, how do you say it, *under a rock?*"

"It's been almost eight months since you were brought here," Tarkin said. "Palpatine and Dooku are dead. I am Supreme Chancellor of the Republic, Grievous is the so-called Head of State of the Separatist rebellion. The war goes on."

"Grievous," growled Maul. "Tell me, does Kenobi yet live? And the Skywalker boy?"

"Anakin Skywalker is unfortunately dead. Kenobi lives. As does that insufferable Tano girl."

"Then I am not completely denied my vengeance." Maul allowed a thin smile, and tapped his fingers on his knee. "And I do think that opportunity will come, Chancellor. You've let me out of that box for a reason, after all. This clearly isn't an execution."

"It could easily be," Tarkin said. "I just have to give the word."

"But you won't. No, you came here because you need something. There is information... it eludes you. You hate the Jedi so much that you'd rather come to me!" Maul laughed. "Perhaps I can help, Chancellor. But I have a price."

"You're in no position to bargain, Maul," Tarkin said.

Maul grunted, and pushed himself onto his feet, standing up to his full height. Aspar's hand drifted near his lightsaber, and Greejatus shrank back. *That won't work on me, boy,* Tarkin thought, looking him straight in the eye with an unamused glare.

"Who would you call on, Chancellor? The Jedi? They're gone-"

"No, they're still here," Tarkin said, smirking. "You assume much."

"Then who..." Maul trailed off, looking at Aspar.

"There's been a schism, Maul," Aspar told him. "Were you expecting something else?"

Maul leaned back against the vault, arms crossed. "Perhaps I was. What do you want, Chancellor?"

"Greejatus, the holocron." Tarkin beckoned him forward. Greejatus took the holocron out of its box, and held it up. That feeling Tarkin had before came back, something unseen brushing against his mind, and the three Force-sensitives all flinched, even Maul.

"Now where did you get this?" breathed Maul. His eyes were wide, entranced by the little black pyramid.

"Emberlene," Greejatus said. "We recovered it last week."

The glyphs came alight on the pyramid, and filled the air around them. Maul looked around in awe, eyes flicking from glyph to glyph, as if he were receiving a religious revelation. "Do you have *any* idea of what this is?" he asked them, as he slowly made his way closer to the object.

"If we did, we wouldn't have come to you," Tarkin told him.

"This is a holocron of Adas, first King of Korriban. The man who united the Sith, before the Republic even existed." Maul reached out as if to touch the holocron, but he held his hand short of it. "Yes, Chancellor Tarkin, I can help you uncover the secrets that lie within this."

"And your price?" asked Tarkin.

"My freedom, of course," Maul said. "If I were you, I'd keep me in this cell until I'd figured this holocron out, then kill me. I won't be giving you that opportunity, Chancellor."

"And how do I know you won't run off the moment I let you out of here?"

Maul looked incredulous for a moment, before calming himself. "I don't think you understand what you have. This is a holocron of *King Adas.* Imagine, if you would, that you were able to hold a relic of your first Human overlord in your hands. That is what this is to me, Chancellor. That holocron is where *everything* began."

"My lord, I don't think this is-" Greejatus began, but Tarkin held up his hand. Maul sneered at the dark acolyte, before turning his burning eyes on Tarkin again.

"This holocron is everything, Chancellor. You give it to me, and I'll help you all you want. Ask that Ahsoka Tano girl. I'm a man of my word." Maul spread his arms, letting a tiny smirk show.

"I think you and I have a lot in common," Tarkin said. "We have no love for the Jedi Order, and we want to know all about this holocron. You and I could work together for a long time. Or for a short time. But listen closely, because I will only tell you this once: don't cross me, Maul. Don't ever cross me."

Maul stared, and Tarkin stared back. He let his mind be open, and let the failed Sith lord see his honesty. There was no anger or bluster in what Tarkin had said, only the truth. Then, Maul nodded. "We have an arrangement, Chancellor."

Sooner or later, Maul would make himself a problem. His record spoke for itself, Maul only looked out for himself. But until then, Tarkin needed this alien mystic-warrior. He was the only way to find out if there was a viable alternative to the superlaser.

Minntooine was becoming one of the planets that Grievous spent more time at than any other. In fact, his own internal systems told him he was coming up on more days spent aboard Minntooine's orbital facilities than at Raxus Secundus, capital of the Confederacy. After the destruction of Pammant's surface, production had moved off the damp, low-gravity planet to the space stations and volcanic islands of Minntooine. The Free Dac Volunteers Engineering Corps hadn't been happy to be even guests of the Karkarodon junta ruling the oceanic planet, but it was the only other friendly location with a large Quarren population.

And so, Minntooine had become one of the Confederacy's prime twin shipyards, sharing that honor with Sluis Van. Unlike Sluis Van, Minntooine was far off major hyperlanes and as such was far less vulnerable to Republic attack on an astrographic level, and could afford to invest time and resources into large projects... such as the *Oceana*-class cruisers, the Separatist answer to Kuat's *Imperator.*

Today, the name ship of the class and prototype, *Oceana*, was going on her first run under her own power. And Grievous would be overseeing it.

There was no doubt that *Oceana* had been readied for operation as fast as physically possible. Worker droids and their organic overseers were still installing secondary and tertiary systems, almost all of the interior was unfinished, no weapons were even aboard yet, the hyperdrive chamber was a mess of cables and conduits that had yet to be attached to each other, but they didn't need any of that. Today, *Oceana* would just be cruising around the system under her own power.

Grievous was slightly annoyed that *Oceana*'s first captain was a Human, one Rel Harsol. But he was a tough, shaven-headed, tattooed soldier, and his record spoke for itself. He'd been fighting in the Outer Rim as a corporate mercenary since he was fifteen. Harsol was military, through and through. Grievous could see the discipline and restraint in every aspect of his body language. This was no impulsive pirate.

"General," Captain Harsol said from his seat, "all systems the computer can connect to are green."

Green meant good, in most Human cultures. Count Dooku had once said green was associated with plants, and life itself, and those tended to have positive connotations with Humans.

"Proceed," said Grievous. His magnaguards were at the blast doors, and he himself stood to the side of the captain's chair.

"Commander Gamoc, take us out," ordered Harsol, to the mottled, green-skinned Rybet male.

"Aye, Captain," said Gamoc, in a throaty voice.

With a soft rumble, *Oceana*'s engines came alive, and the spacedock began to recede as she pushed forward. "Everything's working, Captain," one of the organic crew reported. "All systems nominal."

Good, those Quarren actually did their jobs, Grievous thought. The not-quite-finished cruiser slid away from the orbital facilities, until it was safe to bring up the engines to full power. Such a relatively light ship putting out so much power did not offer a subtle ride. The deck plating beneath Grievous's talons hummed with energy, and as *Oceana* dumped more and more power into the engines, she began to tremble.

"Is this expected?" Grievous asked, watching the screens hanging from the bridge ceiling tremble.

"Um, no, General," said Harsol, checking a datapad. "They said to expect some vibrations, but this is worse than anticipated. I'm sure it'll be worked out."

"And we have yet to reach full power."

"Correct, sir-"

The amphibian officer cleared his throat. "General, Captain, we have reached maximum acceleration of three thousand, two hundred, and forty-two Gs."

Captain Harsol looked surprised. "That's better than anticipated," he said.

"But what is our maximum speed?" asked Grievous.

The two organics looked at him, and then at each other. Gamoc was the one who spoke.

"Sir," he began, his voice trembling like the whole ship was, "our maximum speed is the same as any other matter. That is, just short of the speed of light. We will keep accelerating towards that velocity until we run out of fuel or something stops us."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "Is this more of your fancy physics?" he asked.

"Yes, General," said Harsol. "Classical physics, the kind they teach in school."

"While you attended school, I lived in a cave and built bombs from scrap metal and black powder," growled Grievous, stalking about the bridge until he came around the other side of Harsol's chair. He leaned down, bringing his faceplate to eye level with the Human. "Forgive me, Captain, if I am not as learned as the rest of you."

Harsol did the smart thing, and stared straight ahead, as still and silent as the grave. It was the only move he had that didn't land him deeper in trouble.

The test flight continued, as *Oceana* sped up to what Gamoc called relativistic velocity. "We have reached one percent lightspeed," he reported.

"Very good. Begin deceleration," Harsol told him. *Oceana* flipped about, pointing her engines the opposite direction, and fired them at full blast. The numbers on the monitors began to drop, the ship's velocity downwards as quickly as it'd risen, by increments of thirty-one thousand, seven hundred, and seventy-seven point six meters per second. As they headed back to the shipyard above Minntooine, Harsol was already preparing his report.

"The most noticeable issue was the vibrations. I'll leave it to the engineers to figure out how to deal with those," he said. "I've got a list of other problems reported throughout the ship, most of them seem to stem from the rushed construction. A lot of things shook loose; welds cracking, adhesives failing, bolts shearing, things like that."

This did not surprise Grievous. He'd ordered the new cruisers into production without any testing until this day. It was only natural there'd be problems. "Send it to the design team," Grievous told Harsol. "When will the weapons be installed?"

"The chief foreman tells me they'll be done by next week. We're supposed to be hooking up the main triple turbolaser gun starting the moment we're back in the dock," Harsol said.

"I will return next week, then," said Grievous. Before *Oceana* had even returned to her yard, Grievous was aboard his shuttle and on his way back to *Invisible Hand.*

Zule was the last one out of medbay, and Alize made a special dinner that 'night'–everyone knew there wasn't a day and night cycle aboard the ship except for what shift schedules dictated–to celebrate the occasion. The young Zeltron Jedi padawan-turned-starship engineer was lauded for dispatching half of the invaders. Murshida got his honors for taking down one of the clone commandos, and R8 was given a toast for finishing off the last one.

"Not bad, for a little droid," Buna remarked. No one dared to remind her that she was the one they'd almost killed first.

R8 beeped from his charging port nearby, somehow sounding sarcastic.

There were two faces not so cheery among the crew: the captain, and the first officer. Esera and Voyan had been down on Emberlene for *Encounter*'s entire ordeal. *I'd feel guilty too,* thought Sanya, though she didn't blame them for anything. They'd had their part of the mission, and *Encounter*'s crew had theirs. And in the end, somehow, they'd all walked away alive, if scarred.

"Captain," Lieutenant Oto said, serious as ever, "what is our next mission?"

"Don't talk shop at the table, lieutenant-" Durm started to say, but Esera answered.

"We're meeting with an old... acquaintance of mine and Voyan's, in Druckenwell's system," she said, grimacing.

"He's a real piece of work," Voyan muttered. "Brilliant, in a twisted way."

"Isn't Druckenwell under Republic occupation?" asked Oto. "The privateers I signed on with stopped for fueling there eight or nine months back."

"Not anymore," said Esera. "The Republic's pulled out of this entire sector as of last week, presumably to shorten their supply lines. That pirate, Blox Hatha, hit them hard on the Corellian Run in the Inner Rim."

"Great," Durm said. "Think we've got time for shore leave? It'll be just like the good old days before the war! Right, commander?"

Voyan made something approaching a smile. "I suppose," he said.

"We're not getting any communications from the planet," said Esera. "However, lieutenant-commander, I will authorize an expedition to the surface to see what's going on. While Commander Voyan investigates, I'll see if our *friend* can help with some repairs. We're headed into Hutt Space after this so we'll need to prepare anyway."

"Druckenwell's where the Trade Federation trained all its starship personnel, isn't it?" Sanya asked.

"Yep," Durm said, nodding. His red Neimoidian eyes seemed to twinkle in delight, as he looked off at nothing. "What a time we had there! I couldn't tell you how many memories I've got of that place."

"Yeah, Commander Voyan's told me a lot about it," Zule said. "You know he used to be a racer, back when he was in engineering school?"

"I did, actually!" Sanya let herself grin. "While I was stuck in that medbay bed, I decided to do a bit of snooping about our chief engineer's old haunt. And guess who turned up on some obscure corner of the Holonet? None other than Miha Voyan, and his notorious, illegally-modified, LTR-11 landspeeder, which is sitting down in our hangar right now!"

Alize leaned in, eyes alight. "Our straight-laced Miha? An illegal speeder racer?"

"This has *gotta* be good," Durm said. Even Murshida and Klaud were listening in, quietly curious.

Sanya held up a data crystal and smirked. "I downloaded everything I found, of course. It's all from mirrors, off-planet servers, none of the originals were still accessible."

"Nice!" Zule snatched the crystal, and jumped up to put it in the holotank. "Sorry, commander, but we all need to see you in your street racer phase."

All Voyan did was shrug. But he wasn't smiling. *Is this a mistake?* Sanya suddenly wondered. But it was too late, Alize had the controls for the holotank already. "Let's see," she muttered, looking through the files in the crystal. "Interviews! Oh my, this is from back in late 970! I still had kids in at home when this was recorded."

"And I was a youngling back at the Temple," Sanya said. "So were Zule and Esera!"

Esera didn't even look at her. *Still mad, huh?* thought Sanya.

"Eleven years ain't *that* long ago," Buna grumbled, getting a nod out of Murshida.

"Come on, come on, let's get this started," urged Zule, clenching her fists.

Alize skipped through the interviews with various racers, until she saw a face they all knew. "Aha!" she barked. "Found you, Miha!"

And there he was, on the holotank. Miha Voyan of 970 looked a lot like the Miha Voyan of 982, just with longer hair and a few kilograms of extra weight. But Sanya could see, even through the recording, his eyes were brighter, and body language more uncertain. A nineteen year-old youth, not a thirty year-old man. *He was as old then as I am now...*

"*What* are you wearing!?" Alize screeched, between horror and hilarity.

"It's the damn coralfish outfit," muttered Esera, crossing her arms. "The same damn outfit eleven years ago." Younger Voyan was wearing a maroon jacket and pants, and an iridescently pink floral-pattern shirt. In the jacket pocket was a visor, mirror-finished.

"Don't judge, this was the style back then," Durm said. "Druckenwell's always been a mix of Human and Neimoidian fashion. Outsiders can find it obnoxious."

"I'll say," said Oto, cringing at the scene on the holotank.

"It looks great, what are you talking about?" asked Zule. Of course, a Zeltron would find bright colors and garish decorations appealing.

"*So, Miha,*" said the voice of whomever was recording, "*this is the first time you've made it to the finals?*"

"*Yeah, first time, but I'm feeling optimistic. It's only my second year but I've learned a lot,*" young Voyan said. For a moment, Sanya couldn't tell it had been Voyan who'd spoken in the recording. The accent was completely wrong. It was softer, higher, almost... *Demure? Is that the right word?*

"*He sure has!*" said a second voice, and a young woman barged her way into the frame, wrapping her pink arms around Voyan. That was a Zeltron, obviously. The girl was wearing a scandalously revealing and short blue dress, iridescent like so much of the clothing appearing in the recording, wrapped tight around her curvaceous figure. Her hair was a deep reddish-purple, and she wore a peculiar glittery makeup. "*Miha's been working hard to improve, these guys are never gonna know what hit 'em! We've put in new airbrakes, a turboboost-*"

"*Easy now, let's not spoil it,*" young Voyan told her. "*We are pretty excited to be here tonight, you can see,*" he said to the interviewer.

"*We? Are you two a team?*"

"*You could say that,*" said young Voyan, blushing a little as the girl put an arm around his waist.

"Damn," Sanya said. "Who'd have guessed a dork like you was that much of a player?"

Present Voyan opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. He frowned, and said nothing. Sanya was one of the few who could see his face at this angle, and there was no warmth there. *Guess things didn't work out,* she thought. But interestingly enough, Esera was frowning at the Zeltron girl too. Was it jealousy? No, there was anger there, but pity, too. Somehow, Esera was connected to whatever happened between Voyan and this unknown Zeltron. *I'd love to get this story...*

"What is it with Miha and Zeltrons?" Alize asked, unaware of the feelings of the Humans at the moment.

"Ugh, she's dressed so... ugh." Zule didn't like what she was seeing either, for very different reasons. She stuck her tongue out. "I can't believe I'm distantly related to *that*."

Oto's Cathar ears were twitching. "The commander's voice is dramatically different in this recording," she said to Buna.

"I heard the accent once before," Buna said back, her voice a low, contemplative rumble. "Can't tell you from where, exactly. Out near Teth."

"Teth? Never heard of it."

"Ain't much to hear about. Alize, skip to the action! I wanna see our Feddie break some laws!"

"Okay, okay." Alize fiddled with the remote, and switched to the file with the race.

Sanya was a lot more interested in the interview, but most everyone else got a kick out of the actual race. Voyan's little white LTR-11 screamed down the Druckenwell streets like an angry wedge with the Galaxy's tiniest hyperdrive, alongside other souped-up speeders. Druckenwell was a brilliantly-lit planet, Sanya could see, there were glowing lights spelling out signs and advertisements, bathing the city in blues, purples, greens, and pinks. She began to see why the Druckenwellian fashion of the time was so outrageous, it matched their surroundings.

You know, there's a certain kind of beauty to it, thought Sanya. The buildings were all painted white, they were the perfect backdrop for the lights that painted them by night. The streets were wide, open, and clean, everything looked immaculately maintained, there were plenty of green spaces scattered around the spotless office buildings and apartment blocks. Business by day, party by night, that was what Druckenwell was looking like to Sanya. *This might be my kind of planet!*

The race went on, the speeders drifting around turns and howling down straightaways, dodging the occasional traffic and passing police with impunity. They didn't even turn on their lights. "Police speeders can't catch them, they don't even try," Durm explained. "They've got limiters in their engines to prevent unnecessary wear, looks better on the department's quarterly report."

"Corporate police, a joke on every world," Oto said.

In the end, young Voyan's speeder finished third of twenty-two in the race, which for a newcomer was apparently not bad at all. His Zeltron girlfriend practically jumped into his arms, and a group of young Humans and other assorted aliens that only could have been his friends and supporters were cheering. All the while, the Voyan of the present day watched with a stone cold expression. His current crew cheered too, happy to see their ship's own do so well, even if it had been eleven going on twelve years ago.

"You should take that machine down there tomorrow," said Zule. "Show the new generation how it's done!"

Voyan gave her a tired look. "I don't think so, ensign."

"Probably don't want to be setting that kind of example during war," Durm agreed.

"Hey, is that Zeltron girl still around?" Sanya asked.

"She was on Zeltros last I saw her," Voyan said. No, there was nothing warm in his voice there.

"Mind out of the gutter, Sanya," scolded Zule.

"It's not my fault!" And it wasn't! There were three men on this ship; old man Murshida in his pressure suit, Miha Voyan who was not looking for casual flings, and Gulan Durm who just wasn't interested in women. And none of the women were interested in women, either. Sanya had inadvertently arrived in her own personal hell. She sighed. "You're a Zeltron, Zule, why can't you act like it?"

"Not all Zeltrons are like that."

Oto snorted, ears tilting back for a moment. "You're a one-of-a-kind, ensign."

"I am *not!*"

"You are not..?" The Cathar woman asked, raising an eyebrow.

Zule seethed, but pushed herself into military protocol. "I am not, *lieutenant*."

The table devolved into teasing Zule for her prudish ways. In the midst of it, Esera's commlink went off, and she and Voyan soon departed, leaving the ship in Buna's charge.

The flight from *Encounter* to Khan's supply ship was quiet until Esera decided to speak up. "I didn't think Sanya would go digging on the Holonet," she said.

"If I didn't want people finding me, I wouldn't have agreed to be put on the Holonet," Voyan said, shrugging. "That information is out there for anyone to see."

"I know but, well..." Esera cleared her throat, and focused intently on the control panel. "You know. Naka."

"Yeah, Naka." Her engineer's presence in the Force was seeping bittersweet feelings. "I almost told them she was using me to run spice without me knowing, but I didn't want to ruin the mood. Let the crew have their fun."

"And then you would have had to explain why that was a problem. Awkward."

"Awkward wouldn't begin to describe it. I'm glad Buna couldn't place that accent to Lirra."

"Afraid she might have told them all?"

"Afraid she might have been one of the aliens exploiting us."

"Ah." *Yeah, that'd be really awkward,* thought Esera. She was secretly glad Voyan wasn't making a big fuss over being at Druckenwell. This planet held so many poisoned memories for him, but he was keeping them to himself. Voyan was good at keeping things to himself. *Time to change the subject...* "So... Alpha. What do you think she'll be like?"

"I'm expecting an exceptionally beautiful girl with no morality whatsoever." Voyan crossed his arms over his chest. "So basically, just another Khan we're going to have to watch our backs around."

Soon enough they were in Khan's lab, where many months ago they'd seen a metallic skeleton in a tank. Now, Alpha, complete, sat on a table, completely naked as they'd always seen her. She was slim and lithe, exquisitely shaped, feminine perfection incarnated. Even being in the same room as her made Esera feel like a clumsy, chunky, stubby creature. She tried not to blush at the sight of the very exposed artificial lifeform.

Alpha's head turned and her pupils dilated as she took in the newcomers. Khan stood beside her, a pillar of darkness in the bright lab, red eyes glowing.

"Greetings, Captain Komara, Commander Voyan. Congratulations on your promotion," Khan said, voice deep and suspiciously organic in intonation.

"Thank you," Voyan said.

"I present to you, Alpha, my first daughter." Khan swept an arm out of his all-encompassing cloak, gesturing to the girl sitting on the table. Alpha lowered herself off the table, gracefully, and bowed.

"Greetings, Captain Komara, Commander Voyan," she said, in a high and clear voice. "I am Alpha, biomechanical android, or biodroid, if that phrase is more to your liking. I am pleased to meet you again, now that I am fully cognizant."

Yep, she's Khan, thought Esera. "Hello, Alpha," she said, keeping her voice guarded. "I see you remember us."

Alpha had changed since they last saw her. Her eyes were no longer pale blue, but a striking, vibrant gold. She had hair now, and it was a pure white, spilling down her back. All her hair was white, but for her eyelashes, Esera noticed. *No subtlety, whatsoever,* thought Esera. *She would never work as a spy. Every eye would be on her wherever she went.*

"I remember you. Commander Voyan waved his hands over my eyes to test my response to visual stimulation. He had a pink rubber ball thrown at him by my father." Father, not maker. Alpha thought of herself in organic terms.

"Yeah, I did," said Voyan. "Do you remember anything else, from before?"

Alpha tilted her head. "Not exactly. My father uploaded recordings of my genesis to me, so I could see how I was made. In a sense, I *do* remember you two from our meetings before that day. From the perspective of the security camera in this lab, I remember you two arguing about what appearance I should take, to perform the duties of espionage. I am grateful Commander Voyan's philosophy won out. I should not like to appear old when I am so young."

Esera flushed. "I stand by my argument," she muttered. She looked over to Voyan, and his eyes were everywhere but on Alpha, for obvious reasons. "Um, Khan, could you put some clothes on her?" Esera asked.

"I have no clothes for her," Khan said.

Voyan unbuttoned his jacket, and tossed it to Alpha. "You can wear that for now," he said, no doubt glad for the uniform's white sweater that came beneath the jacket. Alpha put it on, and it was just barely long enough to make her decent.

"I am also grateful you allowed for me to choose my own appearance, Captain Komara," said Alpha, giving her a smile so perfectly faked it might have actually been real. *How long did it take for Khan to get that right?* she wondered.

"That's good," said Esera. "We can't let Voyan win all the time."

"I took the commander's suggestion that I should have red hair quite seriously, but in the end, I decided on white, as a tribute to you."

"A tribute?"

"Yes, Captain Komara. Your hair is black, so mine is white. We are opposites, but linked in our inverted colors." This visual poetry pleased Alpha greatly, Esera could see that.

"Right..." she said. "And the eyes?"

"I thought gold looked aesthetically appealing in combination with the white."

"It is striking," agreed Voyan.

"Then Alpha is a success," Khan declared. "I leave her in your charge, Captain Komara."

Esera blinked. "Wait, what?"

"I have taught my daughter everything I can. There is nothing left she can learn from a state-sanctioned pirate like me," said Khan, as he turned to his creation. "Go, my child. Komara will show you the astounding world you live in. Learn all that you can."

"I will execute your orders, father," Alpha said, putting a hand over her artificial heart. She walked right up to Esera and Voyan. "Captain, commander, I am in your care."

"Alright," said Voyan.

"Hold on, I never agreed to this-" Esera tried to say, but her voice caught in her throat. *You hold on, Esera,* she told herself. *Khan's giving you his biodroid, his only working prototype.* You *will be the one to teach her, and shape her. Not that evil droid.* Alpha wasn't a burden. She was an opportunity. An opportunity to change things for the better, coming from a most unlikely place. The Force could work even through the likes of Khan. She took a deep breath, and nodded. "Alright. We'll take her."

"Excellent," said Khan. "May she serve you well. You are dismissed."

Just like that, Khan booted his so-called daughter out of the only home she'd ever known. Alpha didn't mind in the slightest. She was fascinated by the interior of *Whirlwind*, and gasped when she saw the stars.

"There are a lot more than I thought," said Alpha, face pressed against the windscreen.

"Never seen space before?" Voyan asked.

"This is the first time I have been out of the lab."

"How do you feel?" asked Esera. Because she couldn't sense the biodroid's feelings. She was still just a droid.

"Excited. I think."

"You're not programmed to be sure of your feelings? That doesn't seem in character for Khan."

"My father wanted me to have as genuine experiences as possible. There are many things I am not sure of." Those golden eyes twinkled with anticipation and eagerness, though. Esera had heard of the concept of the uncanny valley, where things too close to Human, yet not quite Human, inspired fear and revulsion in Humans. Alpha had firmly landed on the Human side of that valley. She could believe this was a real girl, but for her lack of presence in the Force. Even *Whirlwind* was a stronger presence. Esera supposed that made sense, the ship had almost been alive before Murshida's exorcism. These days, *Whirlwind* was much more subdued, but still full of character. Esera had no plan to tell anyone the ship performed her own landings on *Encounter* without any input.

"You're going to need a better name than Alpha," said Esera.

"Is Alpha not suitable?"

"It's not a name for people, unless they're property," Esera said. "We had a guest designated Alpha too, recently. A clone trooper."

"I am not property," Alpha agreed, voice firm. "I am a living being."

No, you're not, Esera thought to say, but she stayed her tongue. "Well, Voyan, you named this ship. How about you name the droid?"

"Biodroid," Alpha said, raising her finger.

Voyan put his hand on his chin. He was silent. And the silence went on, until *Whirlwind* arrived back aboard *Encounter*'s now-crowded hangar deck. "I've got it," he said. "Purity."

"*Purity?*" Esera echoed.

"Yes. I mean, she's spotless. Perfect skin, perfect hair, no personal history, no crimes, no sins. Pure. Purity."

"This is acceptable. Please call me Purity Alpha, henceforth," said the biodroid, smiling and looking very pleased with herself.

"That's an even weirder name than just Alpha..." Esera grumbled.

Like it or not, though, Esera registered one *Purity Alpha* in the crew roster. First, an ornery mechanic-engineer. Then an old Skakoan mystic. Then a Zygerrian divorcee and cook. Then a lost Zeltron. Then a failed Jedi prisoner. Then two pirates, an underachieving Neimoidian, and whatever Klaud the Trodatome was. On top of it all, *Encounter* now had a biodroid named Purity, like one of Master Callo's trashy female spaceport 'contacts,' who worked at 'dance' clubs and greeted him with a messy kiss and an offer of hard liquor.

"What is this ship coming to?" Esera muttered to herself, as she watched a curious Purity stick her bare toes through a metal grate. It was in this annoyed mood she faced the weekly meeting with Grievous and his cronies.

The weekly strategy meeting was in session. Grievous sat in his lair above *Invisible Hand,* surrounded by the holograms of his top officers, gathered around the map of the Galaxy. In a break from the usual, Esera Komara was taking an active role in the meeting, instead of observing silently.

"It seems the Republic has completely withdrawn from the Mid Rim systems along the Corellian Run," she was telling the Confederacy's admirals. "New Cov and Druckenwell are devoid of any enemy garrisons or fleets."

"After they fought so hard to take them?" Vice Admiral Rame Cartroll asked, the only other Human on this council today, as Eemon was out of contact at the moment. In fact, the Separatist holdings on the Corellian Run had been his responsibility, until his fleet had been all but destroyed in the days leading up to Coruscant. The Second Fleet had been broken before it'd given up.

"I believe this has to do with Captain Hatha's recent raids in the Inner Rim," said Komara. "He's gone out of his way to capture Republic shipping, for some reason. My sources tell me that the Republic has diverted shipping away from the region. If Hatha wants transports and freighters, it can't be good for them, so they've pulled everything Coreward."

The admirals had long been skeptical of having such a young woman joining their war councils. But if Grievous trusted her, they had no choice but to go along with it. And to her credit, Komara was proving her worth.

"Druckenwell is an industrial world," said Admiral Tuuk. "They wouldn't let us have that back without a fight."

"I agree," Komara said. "There are no transmissions coming from the surface. I'm sending a team down to investigate. Whatever's happened on Druckenwell, you can expect the same on other planets they've likely abandoned, like Nexus Ortai and Mon Gazza."

"See to it," said Grievous. "But our would-be allies on Zoma V are growing impatient. Do not tarry long."

"It should only take a few hours. I've asked Khan to loan us some repair platforms, to patch up damage taken at Emberlene."

"Emberlene?" asked Tuuk. "I wasn't aware anything was happening there. We've got thousands of Emberlener officers in our fleet."

"I advise you, Admiral, to not inform them their home planet lost its war to take over their sector," said Komara, looking annoyed. "They've paid reparations and are barred from building ships for ten years. Who knows how long that'll keep things quiet there."

"I endorse this advisement," Grievous said. "Don't let the Emberleners in our fleet know what happened at home. They're a vital part of our war machine. At least until we can replace them."

"General, I'm not aware of any academic efforts to raise a new officer corps," Alzar Khwaramenes, the skull-faced Givin navigator, said.

"There aren't any."

The Givin shifted in his seat, on his end of the transmission, and Pors Tonith, the Muun, cleared his throat. "General, it takes several years to train an organic officer. The Republic began its training program at the outset of the war, and its only just now delivering its first officers to service"

"They flash-train their clones," Kronaak the crab-man said. "Can we not do the same?"

Mar Tuuk shook his head. "Flash-training makes you as predictable as a computer. In some cases, more predictable. It works for foot soldiers, it does not work for leaders. How can you adapt to every new situation when you instinctively reach for the same rote programming imprinted into your brain?"

"The clones are hardly predictable," Komara said. *Uncharacteristic,* thought Grievous. Usually, the former Jedi girl never said a word at the meetings, let alone voice her disagreement. What had gotten into her today?

"You'd know, wouldn't you?" came the deep growl of Helnurath, the Stenax pirate.

"Yes, I would know," agreed Komara, staring down the huge winged alien. "Flash-training isn't like programming. It's a set of suggestions on how to deal with a variety of scenarios. It doesn't take over your mind, it just gives you something to fall back on when you've got nothing else."

"Have you been subject to flash-training?" asked Tuuk, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, no, but-"

Grievous slammed a fist on the table. "Enough. We will return to this subject later. There is a war to plan for, here. Helnurath, explain the Republic's absence in the outer Corellian Run."

The Stenax nodded. "Our raiding campaigns must be responsible, just as the deserter girl said."

Facing that kind of attitude, Grievous saw why a girl like Komara, who so foolishly cared what others thought of her, hardly ever said anything. One way or another, the truth of her origin had been leaked. By *who* was a question he couldn't answer, and that bothered him. So far, it was contained to the highest echelons of the military, but that could change all too easily.

Khwaramenes spoke again. "I would like to add, General, this may be temporary. Tarkin's escort ship production program is beginning to show results. The shipping tonnage we've destroyed in the last week has fallen for the first time in months."

"There are convoys going into Eriadu, Ord Mantell, and Roche," Komara said. While Grievous already knew this from her earlier private report, the others did not. "Big convoys, with star destroyer escorts. Even Blox Hatha isn't touching those. They're stockpiling fuel, ammunition, medicine, everything. Moving their supply hubs up so far could be risky. But it'll take a whole battle fleet to even make a raid on those systems."

"The girl's a veteran warrior," said Pors Tonith, bringing his teacup to his mouth to hide a smirk.

"Captain Komara's intelligence has always been good," Rame Cartroll said.

"Humans, sticking together, who is surprised?" Helnurath crossed his arms and shook his head.

Neither Komara nor Cartroll was amused at the remark. Grievous glanced between them. The two had never even so much as spoken to each other, a quick scan of his memories revealed that. "This is a council of war, not a stage for your petty bickering," Grievous told them. "Unless you have anything to add to our discussion, shut up."

The meeting went on, focused on whatever the Republic might have been up to. Grievous knew what, partially. It didn't take a genius to put the Stardust weapons program and the Republic's possession of the Ultimate Weapon's plans together. The Free Dac Engineers at Minntooine had assured him that the age of superlaser weaponry wouldn't ever begin. Kyber crystals of that size simply didn't exist anymore. They'd thought it one of Grievous's fancies. *They'll never finish that thing,* thought Grievous. *Tarkin can build a moon-sized battlestation all he likes, he'll never find a weapon for it.*

But right then, a detail flashed in his mind, something he hadn't taken note of during Komara's report from Emberlene, days ago. He brought the document up on his internal display. *Encountered ARC troopers sent by Janus Greejatus to recover a Sith holocron from Emberlene...*

Janus Greejatus, one of Sidious-Palpatine's old accomplices, alive and well, in the employ of Supreme Chancellor Wilhuff Tarkin.

Grievous stood, towering over the table. "Something's come up. You are dismissed," he announced.

The surprised looks on the other officers' faces were only there for a moment before Grievous shut down their transmissions. Komara remained, her hologram looking up at him in confusion. "Uh, I'm still here, Grievous."

"We have a problem, Komara."

While Esera Komara was off doing who knew what as usual, Miha Voyan led the expedition down to the surface of Druckenwell. Durm, to his displeasure, was left aboard to look after Oto, Zule, and Klaud. Buna was a sworn enemy of the Trade Federation and elected to stay aboard, and Alize had dinner to prepare while they would be gone. That left Murshida and Sanya.

"Please, please, I want to come too!" Sanya begged Voyan, as he and the Skakoan, plus a squad of freshly repaired and battle-scarred security droids, made their way from the armory. She'd never seen Voyan with a blaster on his hip before. The cold black metal of the gun clashed with the decorative gold embroidery of his deep blue uniform. Oddly enough, he had two. *Does this dork think he's an ARC trooper?* Sanya wondered.

"You're a civilian, Sanya," said Voyan.

"So is Mister Murshida!"

"I am a trained combatant," Murshida told her. "You are a gardener."

"So?" Sanya bounced around them, feeling very short among these towering men and machines. "Come on, I fought those clone commandos! I'm not useless!"

"Fine," Voyan sighed. "We're bringing Purity anyway, you can come too."

Sanya almost stopped dead in her tracks. "*Who* is Purity?"

"Purity?" asked Murshida, obviously caught just as off-guard.

"She hasn't told you-?" Voyan made an exasperated noise, and glared in the direction of Esera's cabin. "Of course she hasn't, she's been at the meeting all afternoon. We have a new crewwoman, she came aboard just a few hours ago. Her name is Purity Alpha."

"What kind of name is that?" Sanya asked.

As it turned out, Purity Alpha was as extraordinary as her name. At the door of one of the formerly empty crew cabins, a breathtakingly beautiful young woman waited, in clothes clearly borrowed from Voyan- though they were only a little unfitting. What struck Sanya the most was the girl's white hair, tied in a tail that dangled down her back, and her bright golden eyes. Purity Alpha smiled brightly when she saw them.

"Greetings, Commander Voyan!" she said, bouncing on her heels. "Greetings, strangers!"

"Hi," said Sanya, awestruck by the woman in front of her. She was just a little shorter than Voyan, but her exquisite shape and her perfect face made the man look like an ugly, gangling brute next to her.

"Greetings," Murshida answered, meeting her oddly stiff formality. "I am Harak Murshida, formerly of the Skakoan Cyber-Guard."

"I'm Sanya," Sanya said.

"I am Purity Alpha, biomechanical android, or biodroid, if that phrase is more to your liking. I am pleased to meet you." She bowed to them.

Now that explains a lot, Sanya thought. No wonder this woman was so exceptional, she wasn't really a woman, by the legal definition. Biodroids were illegal, they blurred the line between organic and machine too much for most people's comfort. "So, uh, Voyan... do I want to know where you got a biodroid girl?" *A really hot biodroid girl?* "Or *why?*"

Purity took it upon herself to answer: "My father, the *K*-series super tactical droid Khan, has instructed me to learn all that I can about this astounding universe. Captain Esera Komara and Commander Miha Voyan are my caretakers and guardians in this quest." Purity beamed, brimming with innocent energy.

That is so *lifelike, I'm almost creeped out,* thought Sanya. She turned to Voyan. "When were you planning on introducing her to the rest of the crew? Or was she going to be your little secret?" Sanya gave him a friendly elbowing. "You *did* say you were lonely..."

"I am hardly a little secret," Purity said. "I am one hundred and seventy point two centimeters tall-"

"It's a figure of speech," Voyan told her. "Come on, Purity, we're going to see a planet."

"Oh!" Purity leaned forward, fists balled up, eyes lit up in excitement. "Visiting space *and* a planet, in one day!"

Voyan did not match her enthusiasm. He took the other blaster and its holster off his belt, and held it out. "You know how to use this?"

"Of course." The biodroid hooked the blaster's holster onto her own belt–one of Voyan's belts, really–like a veteran soldier. "Will we be going into battle?"

"I hope not," said Voyan. "But better safe than sorry."

"Sanya is not armed, Commander Miha Voyan."

"Sanya has inserted herself into the mission," Voyan told Purity. "If she gets herself killed, that's her problem."

"Mean!" Sanya yelled.

They took the big shuttle down to the surface, and Sanya reflected on the fact this was her first time back down on a planet since her time on Raxus Secundus, all those weeks ago. She'd never spent so much time on a ship before... except for her captivity on *Invisible Hand.* Maybe. That'd been one big blur of monotonous boredom and utter terror, something best left unremembered.

Druckenwell was like most temperate terrestrial planets. Most of its surface was water, its continents warm and wet. Sanya saw whirls of storm clouds below, and patches of green and grey amid the blue water. Across the terminator line, in the darkness of night, there was hardly a single light. *Those cities were lit up like Coruscant, in the holovids we watched this morning,* thought Sanya. She was suddenly very aware of why Voyan and Purity were armed, and why they were taking a squad of security droids down. *I think something's wrong here...*

No navigational authorities contacted them on the descent, another sign something was wrong. Voyan stood behind the pilot droids, face unreadable as it often was. Murshida was putting up with an inquisitive Purity, who was investigating every tool he had attached to his armor. Sanya was left to fidget in her seat. She didn't have a great view from where she sat, so what awaited her on touchdown came as a surprise.

After the videos, Sanya had expected gleaming white towers, lit with beautiful displays of color, and wide streets lined with blooming plants. She'd been looking forward to all the speeders and the daring drivers at their controls. She'd wanted to walk among the gaudily-dressed crowds, and hear the electrosynth music from Voyan's collection that Zule had shown her once. Sanya had wished to be among that vibrant, energetic culture, so much livelier than the tidy green lawns and the neat rows of office buildings implied.

Stepping off the shuttle's ramp, Sanya saw none of that. The trees and shrubs and lawns were gone. The towers of offices and apartments were gone. The wide open streets were gone. The crowds and the speeders were gone. But for the distant crashing of waves nearby, silence reigned over hills and craters of rubble, the air warm and still in the late-day sun. The battle droids spread out around the shuttle, forming a perimeter. Murshida slowly turned about, scanning the destroyed landscape for life. There was some, of the plant variety, here and there, but nothing else. Voyan stared at it all, unreacting.

"It is a lot dirtier than a ship," Purity Alpha said, breaking the quiet. Murshida came to stand beside her.

"You are seeing war, young Purity," he told her. "This city was destroyed."

"A while ago," Sanya said. "There's some seedlings popping up from under the rubble."

"According to my records, Druckenwell was captured over nine months ago," Purity said. "It is understandable if nature is reclaiming this place. But where are the people? Are they dead? The city must have had citizens."

"This was Sunset Avenue," said Voyan. He pointed up and down the former road, only marked by taller piles of rubble lining it. "Over there was the Nok Kur Financial Building. I lived at the Bawry Tower Apartments, right next door. A kilometer down Sunset Avenue was Progress Circle. Take a right there, go three kilometers up to Darani Circle, take a left and you're on University Street. Creative, I know. But another six kilometers down that street was the university. Not that you'd ever know, now."

"I cannot access the local Holonet to confirm this, Commander Miha Voyan," Purity said, as innocent as a child.

Voyan put his hands on his hips, and let out a long breath. "That's a real shame, Purity."

"I am sorry."

Belatedly, Sanya realized why she couldn't access those holovids on their original servers. The Druckenwell servers were probably buried under one of these hills of rubble. Her stomach twisted. "I'm sorry, too," she said. "For showing everyone those videos. I didn't know."

"Don't be. How could you have known?" Voyan stared out over the dusty ruins. "I didn't know."

But you suspected, thought Sanya, remembering what he'd said to Durm at breakfast.

"If anyone should be apologizing, it's me," said Voyan, putting a hand on Purity's shoulder. "Your first time on a planet turned out to be... this."

"I am grateful for the experience, Commander Miha Voyan. I see now why you, Captain Esera Komara, and my father fight the Republic. We must protect other cities on other planets." The biodroid put her hands on her hips, just as Voyan had done moments ago.

The Separatists do this just as often, Sanya wanted to say, but she had enough tact not to actually say that. Her Force sensitivity was low, very low, but it didn't take a Yoda to sense Voyan was feeling *something* at the total destruction of the home of his youth. The bothersome Human wasn't going to show anything if he could help it, though. *No wonder Esera says he's insufferable,* she thought. *What's the point of having feelings if you don't show them?* Perhaps Sanya should ask that of Esera as well, she could be just as difficult to pin down, emotionally. Not that Esera had let Sanya get near her during their time aboard the ship.

"You have a noble heart, young Purity," Murshida said. "That is a worthy cause to fight for."

"How did Khan's daughter end up like this?" Voyan asked, almost under his breath.

"If you are referring to my father's piratical activities, please be aware that I am not him. I have been instructed to create my own moral guidelines." Purity spoke with an incredible earnestness.

The four stood in silence for a while. Voyan wandered off down the remains of Sunset Avenue, security droids following, and Purity turned to look to where the sound of the waves came from. Sanya and she scaled the hill of rubble behind them, Murshida not far behind, and found themselves looking out over a turquoise-blue lagoon, many kilometers wide. Ruins of docks and piers poled up through the water here and there, as did partially-sunken boats. In the distance, across the lagoon, Sanya saw the crumpled remains of some industrial complex, pipes and towers collapsed, storage tanks torn open. The sun beat down on them, and Sanya wondered if Purity could feel it too.

"Not much to see anymore," Sanya said to her.

"This entire metropolis has been leveled," said Purity, turning around to look in all directions. "I do not think this is the result of a battle, this destruction is not incidental. This was a meticulous operation to raze the city."

"What makes you say that?" asked Murshida.

"Observe the destroyed chemical refinery over there." Purity pointed at the heap of machinery. "It has collapsed inward, not outward. That was a demolition. And look how some of the towers have all fallen into their foundations. A good deal of this was deliberate."

"And you think the Republic did this?" Sanya asked. *She's probably right,* thought Sanya, *but I've heard about the Separatists being just as destructive. No one's hands are clean in this war.*

"I believe it was for ideological reasons. My records of Druckenwell show that this planet was a successful industrial and financial center, built up by the Trade Federation free of all Republic influence. Jealousy is one of the primary motivating forces in organic history: a rising economic power like Druckenwell could not be tolerated by the established elite of the Republic. And thus it was destroyed systematically." Purity tilted her head, and frowned. "This damage will take centuries to undo, I think."

"Who says the whole planet got leveled?" asked Sanya. "This is just one city. Maybe it's the biggest, but there were nine billion people on this planet last anyone checked."

"We received no transmissions on our flight in," Murshida said. "But Purity's theory has a flaw: if the Republic wanted to destroy Druckenwell, why didn't they bombard it from orbit? Why level a city a block at a time?"

A vivid memory came over Sanya, from the early months on Agamar. "Maybe they didn't," she said. "I mean, the Republic. Maybe it was the Separatists who razed their city."

"Please explain," Purity said. This biodroid was inquisitive, Sanya had to give her that. Rather than meet a challenge to her idea with hostility, she wanted to know why she was challenged. *This Khan did a damn good job,* she thought. *Maybe a little too good...*

"When I was on Agamar, one of the first battles was to take a spaceport city. Kalani–a super tactical droid, like Khan–decided to turn the buildings into barricades by collapsing them. It took weeks to clear out the droids and militia," Sanya said. "I wonder if they tried the same thing here."

"But why bring things down in such an orderly manner?" Murshida asked. "I see no barricades. The streets are relatively clear, compared to everything else."

The trio were quiet for a moment, thinking on the conundrum. Of course, the biodroid was the one who spoke first. "Perhaps the Druckenwellians needed the streets to be clear."

Aha! Sanya felt a light turn on in her head. "Because the Druckenwellians are good with landspeeders!" she said. "Just ask Voyan, that speeder of his is from this planet. What did they have a lot of? Landspeeders. How are lightweight vehicles like landspeeders best used? At high speed! They needed the streets to be clear so they could fight back the best way they could!"

"Speeders would hit the invaders through the streets the Druckenwellians knew better than anyone else, while others ambushed them from the ruins on either side. Or perhaps they brought down buildings on the heads of invaders who occupied them," guessed Murshida, nodding. "It could have worked, I think. For a time."

"For a time," Purity agreed. "BlasTech had a factory here, but with Tibanna imports cut, it would not have remained operational indefinitely. All the Republic had to do was outlast them. It clearly did."

"So where'd everyone go?" Sanya wondered. "Where's the bodies? The wrecks? The battle droids?"

That was the mystery. The three of them reported their idea to Voyan.

His answer wasn't immediate. He squinted down Sunset Avenue, now lit by an appropriate sunset over the nearby sea, looking up and down the destroyed street. "I lived here for four years," he finally said. "I never would have guessed the Druckenwellians for resistance fighters. But... you never know what you're capable of until you're pushed."

"If only there were survivors," Murshida said. "I haven't seen any signs of them."

"This place is lifeless," said Sanya. "There's no one here."

"Why not take the shuttle and fly around?" Purity suggested.

They did so. But after an hour of circling over the ruins of the city, their shuttle picked up no transmissions and the sensors detected no signs of life. OOM-451, the droid commander, called them back to *Encounter* when their fuel began to run low. Voyan was very quiet the whole time, he hardly said a word. There was a distant look about him, as he stared down at the empty city below.

Can't blame him, thought Sanya. *I wanted in on the action after just a few minutes of holovids. It's all gone now... What a waste.* And what stung most is that they wouldn't know what happened here. Not today, at least. And not tomorrow. *Encounter* was moving out, into the Outer Rim once more. If there were any discoveries to be made, they'd be made by Khan's forces.

And then there was Purity Alpha, the biodroid. Khan's so-called daughter. Her presence would make things interesting. *Interesting is putting it lightly,* thought Sanya.

The dark day on Coruscant had turned to an even more grim day, as squalls of wind and rain ripped through the capital district of the world-spanning city. The general gloom made the operation to extract Maul from the Center for Military Operations that much easier. Officially, Maul wasn't going anywhere. The vision-slit on the Mandalorian vault was clouded over, his life-signs within spoofed. From there, Tarkin simply had all the doors opened, all the cameras looped for the few seconds it took to pass by them–with the help of Orlok, Director of Republic Intelligence–, and have Maul walk out of his cell and into a container in a storage room. Inside, hooked up to an oxygen tank, he was brought into the lowest depths of 500 Republica.

The Jedi knew there was something suspicious under the huge tower, but Palpatine had quickly evicted them and placed his own investigators in charge. *Someone* had built a secret command center, below 500 Republica's lowest sub-basement, mere meters above the planet's actual bedrock. The deepest levels of the Coruscant underworld were a mysterious realm that few surface-dwellers ever returned from, but *someone* hadn't feared it.

The hidden lift was in the middle of the sub basement floor, no one would have ever known it was there if Janus Greejatus hadn't led them to it. The conspiracy to free Maul was something Tarkin wanted to keep close to his chest as possible; only he, Aspar, Greejatus, and Director Orlok knew about it. Aspar and Greejatus both had implored him to bring more security, but Tarkin wouldn't have it. "Maul knows I'm all that stands between him, the Jedi, *and* your Knights," he told Aspar. "He will cooperate or he will suffer the consequences."

The other two didn't look convinced.

At the hidden elevator, Aspar undid the locks on the container. The Zabrak wasted no time; the lid of the container flew up into the ceiling, and he was upright, yanking the oxygen mask off his face. "Boxes, boxes, boxes," he growled, still holding the lid against the ceiling with his Sith powers, "why is it always *boxes?*"

"Up, Maul," Tarkin said, "into your new home."

"I see an empty tunnel," Maul said back, getting out of his box. "But I sense... something."

The failed Sith's senses served him well, they were soon descending down into the secret command center. From here, Sidious had set his plans in motion, Greejatus said. They hadn't changed anything about the place.

"Yes, this is *his* style, there's no doubt," said Maul, wandering around the room. The walls were covered in monitors, but in the center, there was a throne-like chair that could face any direction.

"The Jedi don't know about this place," Tarkin said. "It is well-equipped, safe, and hidden. You will have everything you need, so long as you abide by our arrangement."

"And I'm sure you have a hundred ways to kill me if I break it." Maul gave him a tired look. "Come, now, Chancellor, you and I both know we have no love for one another. There's no need to pretend you care."

"Well said, Maul, well said." Tarkin offered a cold smile. "Greejatus, bring the holocron forward." The dark acolyte held out the little box with the little pyramid in it, and Maul took it, reverently.

"What secrets lie within..?" breathed the Zabrak, holding the box like an infant. "What ancient wisdom has been left to us?"

"That's what you're here to find out," said Aspar, arms crossed. Maul rolled his eyes.

"There is one last thing. You are a very valuable asset, Maul. The Jedi may have a hint this place exists. If there is Jedi trouble..." Tarkin nodded to Aspar, who took Maul's lightsaber out of his cloak. "You know what to do."

Maul took his weapon, and gave them all a quizzical stare. "I could cut my way out of here with this holocron," he said.

"And then you'd be lost in the Coruscant underworld," Aspar told him. "Good luck with that."

"We will be checking in on you regularly, have no fear," said Tarkin.

"You know where to find me, Chancellor," Maul said, with a bow that somehow managed to be sarcastic.

Esera turned off the holoprojector, slumped down in her chair, and let out a long sigh. *What are they up to with that Sith holocron?* That was the question she and Grievous had chased in circles all afternoon and into the evening. Her stomach growled, reminding her she'd missed dinner. Alize would be upset with her, for that.

But Esera wasn't sure she was psychologically ready to eat, after what Grievous had dumped on her in their one-on-one conference. Even before the war had begun, there'd been plans to build a planet-destroying battlestation. Darth Tyranus had given the plans to Darth Sidious, and Sidious had initiated construction above occupied Geonosis a year ago. They'd since moved the object to somewhere unknown. Now, massive amounts of industrial materials were vanishing into the void. Now, an ancient Sith holocron was in the hands of Sidious's surviving dark acolyte, Janus Greejatus. As Grievous had said, the logical leap was not hard to make.

Tarkin thought he'd found a weapon for his nightmare battlestation. A weapon linked to the ancient Sith. One that didn't rely on a Kyber crystal, according to Grievous.

As if we didn't have enough to worry about, with Sidious's goons still running his program, Esera thought, covering her face with her hands. She forced herself to get up, and looked in the mirror, surprised she wasn't going gray from the stress that was being Esera Komara. *Give it a few years, you've only been at this for seven months. Or is it eight?*

She thought it strange, how time could pass so slowly from day to day, and yet the better part of a year had flown by in what felt like moments. Seven or eight months ago, she'd been a sickly, useless Jedi girl struggling not to get killed on Shumavar. Now she was the secret right hand of General Grievous. The idea still boggled her mind.

In this reflective mood, Esera went down to the mess hall. It was late now, the day shift was settling in for sleep, the scant night shift already on duty. That was really just OOM-451 on the bridge. Her military crew wasn't big enough for four shifts, Esera kept them working together by day–not that day existed in space–so they learned to function as a team. She fully expected the mess hall to be deserted. Hopefully Alize had left her a meal in the refrigeration unit.

But there was someone in there, dark as the mess hall was. Esera sensed who he was before she could see him.

"Commander Voyan, shouldn't you be in bed?" she asked.

Voyan paused what he was watching on the holotank, and looked over his shoulder. "Good evening, Captain. I'd ask the same of you."

"I'm getting my dinner," said Esera.

"Carry on, then, Captain." Voyan went back to whatever it was he was watching. *Hey, wait, that's the stuff Sanya found this morning,* realized Esera. The other interviews, the ones they'd skipped. She listened in as she heated up the food she found. There was very little of interest, to Esera; lots of speeder-talk, engines and air brakes, compressors and repulsorlifts, something about lines and corners. But Voyan watched on, his presence in the Force somber.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. "About... what's down there?"

"Disappointed, but not surprised," Voyan said. He avoided looking her in the eyes, his gaze fixed on the holotank. "I ended up knowing that city like the back of my hand. Now, it's just... gone."

"That's rough," said Esera, for lack of better words.

"It is what it is, Captain. Nothing we could have done. Hell, we were probably still on *Invisible Hand* when it happened. I'm trying not to let it get to me."

The heater dinged, Esera took her meal out and sat down at the table across from him. "Did you know these people?" she asked as she ate.

"A little... I knew them better than they knew me, I think. I kept to myself," said Voyan. His mouth twitched downwards. "There was someone on my mind at the time. She was very happy, getting so much of my attention."

"Ah..." *Naka, still an awkward subject,* she thought. Esera had read his report on what they found on the planet. Skimmed over it, really. Druckenwell was in ruins, survivors were nowhere to be found. With *Encounter* outbound from the system, they wouldn't know anything else for a while. "You still keep to yourself, you know. For a place you lived in for four years, your report of the destruction was very... clinical."

"Of course it was, it's a report, not a poem. Besides, it's uncouth for men to show much emotion, where I'm from," Voyan said. "You smile too much, you're weird. You get angry, you're dangerous. You laugh too loudly, you're crazy. You cry, you're weak and unworthy of respect. In retrospect, I don't think our upbringings did either of us good. I had to hide what I felt, you weren't even allowed *to* feel."

"Just what kind of place was Lirra?" asked Esera, as several aspects to this insufferable engineer came together all at once. In this context, Voyan's stone-faced mask that challenged even her perception made a lot of sense. His–perhaps former–reluctance to get close to anyone made sense too, even without the Naka incident and treatment by the Trade Federation.

"An unhappy place, for everyone," said Voyan. "Druckenwell was... challenging, to a younger me. So many people, unafraid to be open. Can you imagine-" He stopped, and gave her a sidelong look, almost sly. "You *can* imagine, can't you?"

"Yeah... I can," said Esera, thinking of her first time out of the Temple with Master Callo. That bittersweet feeling came over her with the thought of him, just as it always did. Seeing people so unrestrained after a childhood in the Jedi Temple had been a shock, to say the least.

"There's a lesson here, Captain," Voyan said. "All those people on the holotank, for all I know they're dead. I can't get to know them like I could have, back then."

"Leave it to you to turn this into a lesson. Okay, drop the riddles, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, the universe doesn't offer second chances often. You should take advantage of the one you have. You never know what'll happen tomorrow. Something right in front of you today might disappear forever." He gave a nod towards the crew cabins. Towards Sanya's cabin.

Ah, now I see, thought Esera. She frowned. Her stomach twisted at the idea of forgiving such a betrayal. "I'm not dealing with her tonight," she said, crossing her arms. "You're not wrong, but... not tonight."

Voyan shrugged. "Your actions are your own to decide, Captain. I'm just offering my hindsight."

"It's appreciated. It really is. But I've been dealing with Grievous all day, and Khan, and Purity-" Esera's eyes went wide, and she looked up. "We forgot to introduce Purity to the crew."

Voyan sighed, and turned off the holotank. "Yes, Captain, we forgot."

"You'd think we'd be better at this by now!"

"Evidently not, Captain."

"Shut up. You're the first officer, you're supposed to support me."

For the first time in their conversation tonight, he turned to face her directly. "Only in front of the crew. Otherwise it's up to me to be your greatest critic."

"I hate you, Voyan. I'm going to bed." Esera got up, and pushed in her chair, secretly glad the devastation of Druckenwell wasn't causing a personal crisis she was ill-prepared to deal with. After all, Voyan was the ship's counselor, not her. "And you should too, we're headed into Hutt Space tomorrow."

"I'm aware. Have a good night, Captain."

"You too."

Author's note:

This would have been up a few days ago if a very sudden power outage hadn't corrupted my document and forced me to revert to an earlier version, costing thousands of words of progress. Very discouraging. Remember when someone said Druckenwell was a bombed-out war zone in chapter 32? That pays off here, an IRL year later. Also, attentive readers will note we have passed into the year 18 BBY, or in-universe, 982 (since the Ruusan Reformation). It's very early "January" for lack of better term (so that's why they say 11 years, not 12, since 970). But new year celebrations don't mean much when you live in space and visit a planet every few weeks, so it goes by uncommented.

Do you also remember when I said we had two and a half big characters left, a long time ago? We're at one big character left, after this chapter. I'm not sure I got Maul's character right. He's the silent serious type in TPM, but in Filoni Wars, he's gone a little crazy, a little kooky, a little bananas, if you know what I mean. By the Mandalore arc he's mostly recovered but he's still a bit out there in my opinion. So I portrayed him the way you see here, an exasperated eccentric who's very much his own man but not as murder-happy as he has been in the past. My Valued Editor, Corshy, was curious about Aspar's lack of strong reaction to working with Maul. I directed him to chapter 25. As for Purity Alpha the biodroid, she's been a long-time coming, we met her proverbial embryonic form in chapter 20. Esera saying she forgot to introduce Purity to the crew is really just me saying I forgot to do it, wrote the scene, and lost it anyway thanks to the outage. When life gives you lemons, you make them a plot point, right?

A Valued Reviewer asked what ASD stands for. I ask that he check the title of this work. Another said the Sun Guard were the sigma males of the Galaxy. I didn't know what a sigma male was but after a quick google search (the previous Valued Reviewer I addressed may find this forbidden technique useful to answer his question of "Worf effect?") I can say yes, they are sigma males, insofar as they're the kind of men who would unironically call themselves sigma. That wraps it up for now. Hopefully I'll have another chapter up at the end of September.

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